



Children's social work – the variety of work, challenges and rewards

Laura Neal-Jowett, Wolds and Dales Safeguarding Team, East Riding

Before she decided to study social work, Laura was already working with people in a challenging frontline role as a prison officer.

“To be honest when I was at School I didn't really know anything about social work. After school I went to college to study Public Services as I wanted to go into the prison service as an officer. I did a bit of care work for the elderly in a mental health unit whilst waiting for a job to become available as a prison officer. I worked as a prison officer for five years altogether, I completed my first year of my degree on my rest days. I then left to finish my degree as this involved work based placements.”

“In the prison service there wasn't really a great deal of room for advancement or a change of path if you wanted to specialise in something. You could work your way up to become a governor, but that was more of a management role that didn't involve actually working with the prisoners, which I did not want. So instead, I looked into other careers such as social work and nursing. Social work seemed to have the most opportunities to go into different areas, like adult social care, mental health teams, disability teams, children's services such as looked after children or safeguarding. I didn't want a career that felt like I'd be stuck in like I'd felt working in the prison service, social work seemed to offer everything I was looking for.

“I continued to work at the prison, working shifts while I studied at the University of Lincoln. At the time, if I had gone for the full-time degree route I wouldn't have been able to pay my bills, but the University of Lincoln did an employment-based course so I was able to balance the two.”

While studying, Laura managed to fit in working at a nursery alongside gaining a range of experience through work placements.

“While I was still studying, my first placement was with the Hull Families Project doing family support work, working with kids who had behavioural problems and things like that. On my days off I chose to work at a nursery, because I had never worked with kids before, I had worked in a prison with adult males and worked with elderly people. So I did two days a week at the nursery to pay bills and cover the costs of running my car whilst I was on placement. My second placement was at CAFCASS (the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service), which I really enjoyed. These are often very experienced social workers that are working in a specialised team based mainly in court.

“While I was at CAFCASS I was also working for the NHS as part of the Mental Health Service, in both the mental health secure units and for the section 136 department alongside the police. So I did a range of everything really, this gave me a better understanding of what I wanted to do and a much wider work experience to help me in my role. Even though both of my placements were with children, I wasn’t totally settled on children’s Social work, as I had enjoyed working with adults in the mental health units too. I just knew that children's wellbeing had always been my focus, even when working in the prison or for the NHS when children were not my role.”

Laura’s role on the children's safeguarding team involves interacting with a wide range of people in order to conduct assessments and support children and their families. While teamwork is an important part of the job, she feels that there are differences in how a social work team functions compared to her previous team's in the prison service, nursery and for the NHS.

“I work in the Wolds and Dales Safeguarding Team, based in Bridlington, so we cover a massive patch. I’m part time as I’ve just come back from maternity leave and I was lucky enough that I could offer a job share with another social worker. My role is in children and families safeguarding. We have cases that come through from various agencies such as NSPCC, drug and alcohol services, domestic violence agencies, schools, members of the public or anyone who has concerns about the care of children. We have a team who take phone calls initially, as often calls will come through regarding cases that we are already working on, so they can be directed to the case worker. Every day there will be at least one duty social worker to pick up at our end of the phone, we take it in turns in doing this.”

“We have 45 days to complete an assessment in East Riding which doesn’t sound very long, but with it being working days it is a couple of months. This is to gather all of the information and then to write it and Managers to authorise it. We speak to health visitors, midwives, schools, school nurses, and both parents. We also talk to wider family members and other agencies if they are already working with them. This is so that we are working using a multi-agency approach to ensure we have as much information as possible to inform our decision making.

“Teamwork is really crucial. Most of my experience before social work was shift work, where you come on shift and had your team around you. It was different in social work, being office based and responsible for your own caseload. It was a bit daunting at the start, and it did feel like I was quite alone with a lot of responsibility but I realised that to get the best outcomes you need your team, just in a different way to shift work. You need them to bounce ideas off, to learn from cases they’ve handled before, and you need them there for emotional support as well. Plus the responsibility for decision making is not just on yourself as any decision goes to your manager and they help you do this in your supervision”

While safeguarding work is not without its challenges, for Laura the thing that makes it worthwhile is when her efforts are recognised by the young people she works with.

“It can be challenging, knowing that you can’t do everything you want to do. When something is outside of your role or you realise that someone needs access to a particular service but

there's a waiting list. That's hard, when you have people who need help but you can't put that help in place straight away.

"The most rewarding thing is when you get positive feedback from the kids, especially if things have been difficult. Like with teenagers, even if they may have had a slanging match with you and said you were rubbish at your job, sometimes they come back afterwards and apologise and recognise what you've helped them with. Getting that recognition is very rewarding – it's priceless!

"All in all, it is a great job. For every day that you're stressed, you know you're doing it to safeguard the children even if at the time they can't see it. Then there'll be one day that's really rewarding and it will make all of the other days seem worth it. On a good day, you're going home knowing that you've changed people's lives for the better."

This case study has been captured as part of Children's Social Work Matters campaign ['Improving Lives'](#).